



Idaho Naturalist news

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The Idaho Naturalist News is a quarterly newsletter of the Idaho Master Naturalist Program.

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The Magic of Angling at Eight Thousand Feet

There is something up here you can't really define
Surrounded by silence and the sweet scent of pine
Perhaps it's because very few venture here
Regardless of weather or time of the year
We stumble through sagebrush 'til the day turns to night
The trout that await us will be there at first light
Nocturnal coyotes bark and howl at the moon
Hear it often enough, you remember the tune
Light rods and small flies on diaphanous tippet
Quarters so tight you can't cast, but just flip it
The cascading water runs pure, clear and cold
Under moon it shines silver; in the sun, sparkles gold
Some places you visit only once in your life
And the ache to return cuts your heart like a knife

Steven Berg, Idaho Master Naturalist, Sagebrush-steppe Chapter

The Wood Duck House Adventure

Barb and Steve Huff, Idaho Master Naturalists, McCall Chapter

The “Wood Duck House Adventure” started with one experienced park ranger, Terri Bryant, and two inexperienced but eager Master Naturalists, Barb and Steve Huff.

Building the Houses First we cut the pieces. Terri supervised, using her considerable carpentry skills to craft the finer aspects of the houses. Several working days and many laughs later, the wood duck house (and smaller blue bird house) parts were ready for assembly. Our aim was to share the assembly part of the project with families. We scheduled the event to celebrate International Migratory Bird Day.



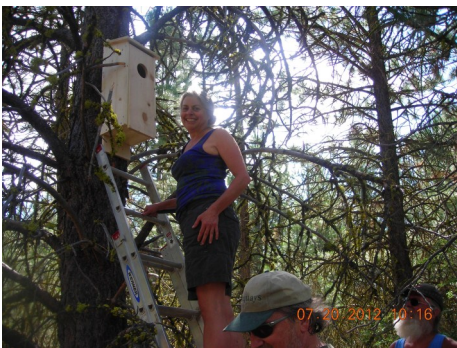
To launch the event, on a sunny McCall Saturday morning, several McCall Chapter members and community individuals gathered for a bird walk. Led by Idaho Fish and Game’s Diane Evans-Mack, the eager group of nearly 25 binocular-toting participants forged along behind Diane as she sped along the trail, stopping here and there as she saw or heard a member of the bird family. Somehow she managed to carry a telescope almost as big as her, infecting us with her enthusiasm, keen eyesight, and even keener sense of hearing. We identified over 30 birds during our two hour walk.

We headed back to the Activity Center, enjoyed a picnic lunch, then prepared children’s games, set up a table with bird information and another with items donated for game prizes. And, finally, tables of wood duck and bluebird house parts, accompanied by the necessary drills, screwdrivers, etc., and awaited for the onslaught of families. Alas, our families were missing. While waiting, we tried out the children’s games, colored the bird outlines. Realizing our families had scattered elsewhere to enjoy the beautiful day, we spent the afternoon assembling the bird houses, some of us handier with the drills and assembly process than others. We did our best and had a lot of laughs.

Installing the Houses Several weeks later, three of our members and one member’s spouse set out to install the houses in the Lake Cascade area. Marjorie Feldman Chase and her good-natured spouse Steve Chase joined Barb and Steve Huff to travel the 30 miles to Cascade. Riding in the Chase’s truck, with the houses, bedding for the houses, wheelbarrow, ladder and all else needed for the installation, we arrived at the first site and unloaded our gear.



After lining each wood duck house with straw and placing petroleum jelly inside the boxes on the roof to keep wasp nests from attaching, we loaded some houses and tools in the wheelbarrow and took off down a bumpy road in search of a good location. We looked for a location 50’ off the road, away from travelled areas and on a sturdy tree trunk with adequate branch clearance to place the boxes 6’ to 9’ above ground. We installed several houses, placing them facing southwest.



On one of our last stops we had to take several houses up a steep gravel road. Rather than carrying them, we put the wheelbarrow, ladder, etc. in the back of the truck and drove. When almost at the top, we heard something shift in the truck bed and turned to watch some of the houses escape. We stopped to replace the houses back in the truck (fortunately no damage) and noticed our wheelbarrow was gone. Back down the road we travelled, finding the wheelbarrow a half mile back.

Top photo: Assembling wood duck boxes at International Migratory Bird Day. (Diane Evans-Mack and Master Naturalists Marjorie Chase; Loretta McConnor; and Irwin Mulnick.) Middle photo: Steve Huff putting up wood duck box, Barb Huff and Steve Chase supervising. Bottom photo: Smile, Marjorie, good job! (Steve Chase and Steve Huff admiring the work.)

Hawk Survey Reaps Bountiful Sightings

Evan Tibbott, Idaho Master Naturalist, Upper Snake Chapter

Since January, Dave Godfrey and Evan Tibbott have been doing hawk surveys in the Mud Lake area one day a month. In February, a total of 20 rough legged hawks were observed. Their favorite perches are on telephone poles, tree branches or other projecting vantage points around farms.

In addition, about four miles south of Highway 33, seven bald eagles were seen near a sheepherder's wagon and a large flock of sheep. Attracted, apparently, by a nearby carcass, six were adults with one, likely, a juvenile. Nearby were three more eagles. A gathering of eagles.

Our March 25, a total of nine rough legged hawks, four red tailed hawks, a kestrel, and a northern harrier were observed in the same area, indicating that some of the rough leggeds had begun to move north. The highlight of the day was the observation of large numbers of snow geese that were feeding in grain and spud fields at the northern end of the survey area, three to four miles north of Mud Lake and just outside the Mud Lake Refuge. They were at least a half mile away and precise numbers could not be obtained. At that distance, they described a dense white line. However, by estimate, they numbered at least three thousand.

On March 23, during a visit to Market Lake Wildlife Refuge, hundreds of coots were resting and feeding in the newly opened ponds and marshes. Also, four red breasted mergansers in the marsh along the entrance road displaying their green black heads feathered out behind like bonnets.

During a project to refurbish goose nests by members of the Upper Snake Chapter of IMN over March 19 and 20 at Deer Parks WMA, west of the Menan Buttes, large numbers of trumpeter swans, accompanied by mallards and pintails were seen in fields and in flight during the day. A stiff north wind kept it on the chilly side, with the strengthening sun filling the afternoon sky with masses of thick, feathery clouds and snow curtains, which occasionally reached the ground as snow showers. Saturday, we focused our attention on nearby Cartier Slough, chopping out still-frozen straw nest bedding and replacing it with fresh straw for geese. Members got plenty of walking through dense willow stands and across the expanse of former marshes. As a backdrop, along the western horizon, the Lemhi and Lost River Ranges stood in snowy grandeur; to the north, forming the Montana border, the Centennial Range stretched along the horizon. What more could you ask for a stage setting?

Snow Tracks

Alice Crockett, Idaho Master Naturalist, Upper Snake Chapter

The snow is deep in the field behind our house. We can walk for a long time before fences or ditches stop us. In winter we follow tracks in the snow. Bird tracks, animal tracks, unknown tracks—it's a fun thing to do and good exercise.

My husband Alan and our dog Davy walked out one recent Saturday afternoon to follow tracks. They were hoping for fox tracks leading to burrow's entrances. They returned after several hours and Alan described the tracks they had investigated. There had been fox tracks. Even three fox tracks highways leading to the remains of cow number 43. They found three fox burrows, entrances packed, definitely in use. Several more abandoned or infrequently used burrow (maybe escape hatches for quick flight). There had been hawk, magpie, rabbit, mouse and vole trails threading over and lacing lightly the sleeping white fields. And there had been a track of something or someone so mysterious that Alan couldn't decipher it.

"I'm going to look it up in the track book we got at Craters of the Moon last February," he said while rummaging through the bookshelf.

"What did it look like?" I asked.

"Definite long narrow footprints, but with scrapes or maybe propelled snow streaks in front of them. As if it hit with such impact that snow was sprayed from the landing. And each track was a least fifteen feet from the previous one. I can't imagine what moves at that speed and force." Alan searched but found no clues or answers.

The next morning I asked Alan if he would take me to see the mysterious tracks.

"Sure," he answered.

So after chores were done and the sun had climbed high into the sky, we headed for the field.

We trudged up and down the rolling snowy fields, passing wheel lines, fox burrows, and many snow tracks.

"They're right here," Alan called.

I walked up to where he was standing, and I saw them. They were just as he had described and I'd never seen anything like them. I looked west to where they led—the even tracks stretched to the horizon. I knelt and looked closely. The long streaks, almost scratches (or maybe long feather prints) preceded the narrow heavier foot tracks for a foot and a half.

"What if they weren't going west?" I said. "What if the streaks were behind the feet?"

I looked northeast and followed the trails of tracks to the fence line. There, up against the barbed wire fence was a huge tumbleweed.

"It's the tumbleweed," I laughed.

We trudged over to the culprit. Its huge brittle crooked root fit the tracks exactly and its long prickly branches streaked the snow's surface perfectly.

"Remember the big wind we had a couple of nights ago?" I said.

We both smiled and looked to the western horizon. Together we wondered just how far the big tumbler had bounded, so evenly, so purposefully until a fence used for cows caught it.

Third Grade Natural Science Field Trips at Ponderosa State Park

Connie Harris, Idaho Master Naturalist, McCall Chapter



Left: Trillium flowers. Students learn not to pick them! Middle: A fox resting by his den in Ponderosa State Park. Right: Glacier lilies, one of the first wildflowers of the season.

Master Naturalists Toni Sheldon, Connie Harris, and Ponderosa State Park Ranger Terri Bryant present a series of field trips during the autumn and spring seasons for local third grade students in McCall.

The program highlights scientific observation of the seasons and cycles of life, including plants, animals, and trees in Ponderosa State Park. Students divide into three groups that rotate through each presenter to explore various topics.

In the fall, the first group learns about the different animals inhabiting the park. The program centers on members of the squirrel family as a center of the food web. The discussion includes observation of their physical appearance and their survival needs for the various seasons. Students are able to view various habitats, middens (or caches), and sometimes view newly born animals in the spring. They are taught how to view wildlife safely and not disturb new-born animals.

The second group explores the life cycle of plants native to the park. They learn how plants' survival depends on their various methods of seed dispersal in autumn. The spring field trip reveals the "awakening" of the tiny embryo within the seed and the growing plants as a result. They also discuss the fact that many early blooming plants come from bulbs or tubers that have overwintered in the ground. The students are taught the importance of preserving the wildflowers by not picking them.

The third group learns of the many different kinds of trees in the park and how to identify them in the fall. They observe the changes of the trees during this season, discuss how each species survives the cold winter months, and learn how a tree can survive for hundreds of years.



Eroding roads from mountain bikes and a 3rd grade poster advocating against it.

In the spring, this group explores the effect off-trail mountain biking has on the environment. They view the erosion that is caused by this activity, the vegetation that is destroyed, and discuss how this affects the wildlife that lives in the park. Emphasis is placed on staying on trails, obeying signs, trail safety, and stewardship.

These field trips supplement and enhance the third grade science curriculum. The third graders learn to enjoy and appreciate the natural beauty of Ponderosa State Park.

Snake River Human and Natural History

Bob Ellis, Sagebrush-steppe Master Naturalist



This picture shows the historic Guffey railroad bridge, a soaring red tail hawk, a petroglyph, and a singing horned lark. There is much to see and do at Celebration Park that the whole family can enjoy. A variety of song birds, raptors, and water fowl await to surprise you. You can imagine the Paleolithic peoples here and the abundant wildlife that would be readily available to them. You can try your hand at throwing a dart with the atlatl, realizing that skill was necessary to bring home dinner. The petroglyphs tell us the early Indians stood and carved where you stand as you look at the carvings. Imagine the force of the Bonneville flood which moved these huge chunks of basalt to where they now rest. Is it possible the first people here could have witnessed that flood?

Snake River Human and Natural History (a Haiku)

Celebration park
Desert life and history
Part of who we are



CATS INDOORS!

THE CAMPAIGN FOR SAFER BIRDS & CATS

Do You Have a Cat? Does It Go Outdoors?

Breaking News - New study identifies cats as top threat to birds

A newly released study by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that domestic cats kill 1.4-3.7 BILLION birds annually in the United States. This scientifically rigorous and systematic study identifies un-owned cats (i.e., barn cats, strays, cats in outdoor colonies, and ferals) are responsible for ~69% of these kills. Additionally, the study estimates that cats kill 6.9-20.7 BILLION mammals annually in the United State and that 89% of this mortality is caused by un-owned cats. Learn more: <http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/index.html>



Artistic Highlights

This drawing of a swamp sparrow is by Wood River Valley Master Naturalist Poo Wright-Pulliam. The discovery of this little fellow (along with a companion)— a first for that count area—was sighted by Larry Barnes during Hagerman's CBC mid-December.



Tim McNeil from the Sagebrush-steppe Chapter took this photo of a mink this winter while participating in the Boise River aquatic bird survey for IDF&G.



This Saw-whet owl, estimated about eight inches tall, took recent refuge in a tree in Sagebrush-steppe Master Naturalist Marylee Krebs Hale's yard.